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(54) Optomechanical components for use as optical interconnects

(57) Optical components that are designed to be coupled together in modular fashion to form an optical network. The components are shaped so that a plurality of components can be coupled together to form a light cube. The components are provided with mating means to permit easy coupling. The preferred form of component is a right-angled triangular prism that can be coupled together with a similar prism to form a cube.

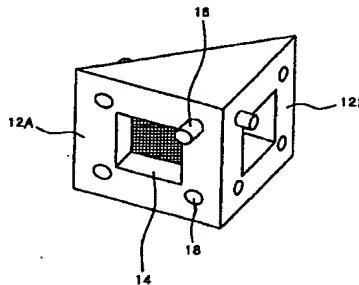


FIG. 1

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Description

Field of Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to optical transmission and more particularly to optomechanical components that can be assembled together in modular fashion.

Background of the Invention

[0002] In an earlier application entitled "Modular Building Block for an Optical Interconnection Network", Serial No. 08/812,625, filed March 7, 1997 by Kenneth J. Fasanello, T.J. Kim, David Neilson and Eugen Schenfeld, and having a common assignee as this application, there are described optomechanical components for use in free space optical networks.

[0003] Other examples of electrooptic and optical components useful in free space optical networks are described in U.S. Patent No. 5,414,819 entitled "Optical Interconnect Network", in U.S. Patent No. 5,619,359 entitled "Optoelectronic Apparatus", and in pending U.S. patent application serial no. 08/558,352, filed November 16, 1995 entitled "Optoelectronic Apparatus."

[0004] One of the factors limiting the use of optics in systems of the kind mentioned are the high costs of the optical components and of their assembly in such systems. Much of the cost of assembly is related to the difficulty of alignment of such components to the close tolerances required for optimum use of such components. For optics to make major inroads in transmission networks there is a need for optical components that are both low in cost and readily amenable to easy assembly.

[0005] The present invention seeks to present a solution to these needs.

Summary of the Invention

[0006] From a broad aspect, the invention involves optomechanical components of a material and of a geometry that can be made to high precision, for example, tolerances of several microns, and at low cost, for example by injection plastic molding or similar process, and that can be readily assembled with like components to form devices useful, for example in optical systems. In particular, a basic component in accordance with the invention comprises a prism that, when coupled with one or more similar prisms forms a structure that can be readily coupled to similar structures to form an optical network. Of special interest is a right angle triangular prism that when combined with a similar prism forms a cube. Such a prism includes a pair of surfaces that are essentially square, a hypotenuse surface that is essentially rectangular, and a pair of passive surfaces that are essentially right triangles. Another geometry of particular interest is a four-sided pyramid having a square base

and four equilateral sides. Six of such pyramids can similarly be assembled to form a cube. A particularly useful property of cubes so formed is that they provide oblique internal surfaces that can be made reflective to split or redirect incident beams. Additionally one or more of the surfaces of each of such prisms is provided with male and/or female coupling means, such as pins and holes, that permit the prisms to be conveniently coupled together in desired alignments with close tolerances.

[0007] Additionally, such a prism typically will include at least one surface in which there is included an indented, or inset, region where there may be positioned a microlens array or other similar optical element.

[0008] In particular, in the preferred basic component comprising a right-angled triangular prism, each of the square surfaces includes, at least in one corner, a mating pin and, at least in one other corner, a mating hole or socket. Additionally, typically, at least one of its two square surfaces includes an indented, or inset, region into whose surface there is molded a microlens array. Additionally, the rectangular, hypotenuse surface supports a two dimensional array of micromirrors of which selected mirrors can be made either opaque, partially reflective, or transmissive to incident light for use in beam control. Alternatively, such a surface may be provided with a coating, grating or hologram that will provide a prescribed reflective, refractive or diffractive function with respect to incident light.

[0009] Typically, in such a prism, the inset region is about 4.5 by 4.5 millimeters square and is centered in the cube face and two such prisms can be combined to form a cube of about one-centimeter at each edge.

[0010] The material used to form the bulk of the prism is chosen to be essentially transparent at the wavelengths of the light being used for transmitting the signal information. It also should be amenable to injection molding, or like manufacturing technology, that will permit low cost fabrication to the high precision desired, typically to tolerances of about several microns.

[0011] Additionally, each prism of the kind, described, that includes a surface with an inset, advantageously includes at such surface, a perimeter region surrounding the inset where there can be provided circuitry for the control of arrays of optical elements, such as lasers, photodetectors or fiber interconnections that are supported at such inset.

[0012] In its broader aspect, the invention contemplates a wide variety of optomechanical components that can be used in a modular system of the kind described and that have in common the properties of being easily coupled in accurate alignment for ready assembly and also able to be made by processes, such as injection molding, to be of low cost and able to meet close tolerances.

[0013] Modules of the kinds described can be assembled in a variety of ways for use in a wide variety of optical applications, as will appear from the more detailed

description that follows when taken in connection with the accompanying drawing.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0014]

Figures 1 and 2 are two views of a prism of the kind that forms the preferred building block or component in accordance with the invention;

Figure 3 is a perspective view showing a pair of prisms of the kind shown in Figure 1 coupled together to form a cube of the kind that forms a basic component in accordance with the invention;

Figure 4 shows a cross section of a cube of the kind shown in Figure 3;

Figure 5 shows a portion of a typical optical network formed with components in accordance with the invention;

Figure 6 illustrates electronic and electro-optic devices supported on a prism;

Figure 7 shows a cross section of a cube formed by a pair of prisms of slightly modified form;

Figure 8 illustrates a plug-in module for coupling to a beam waveguide;

Figure 9 is a cross section along line A-A in Figure 8;

Figure 10 illustrates a portion of a connector module;

Figure 11 is a plan view of a portion of the connector module shown in Figure 10; and

Figure 12 illustrates a connector module for use with optical fibers of increasing diameter.

Detailed Description

[0015] With reference now to the drawings, the right-angled triangular prism shown in Figures 1 and 2 includes a pair of square faces 12A and 12B, a rectangular hypotenuse surface 12C and upper and lower triangular surfaces not numbered. The square faces 12A, 12B are each provided with a centered square inset 14. The surfaces 12A, 12B and 12C are provided near each corner with either a mating pin 16 or mating hole or socket 18. Typically a square face will have one pin and three holes, while a rectangular face will have two pins and two holes. The pins and holes are all located with high precision to serve as the alignment means as

prisms are coupled together to form a modular arrangement. Each pin typically may be several millimeters both in diameter and in length and the holes sized appropriately to provide a stable tight fit with the pins that may be inserted therein.

[0016] In some instances where more permanent couplings are desired, adhesives may be used to provide additional coupling.

[0017] The insets are adapted to support various optical components, depending on the role to be played by the particular prism. Some of the prisms will serve as light sources for transmitting signal information, in which case an inset might be provided with a microlaser array. Alternatively or additionally, a prism might be adopted to support either alternatively or additionally a receiver, in which case an inset might be provided with an array of photodiodes. Additionally, it may be desirable to include a microlens array to augment the role of such microlasers or microphotodiode arrays.

[0018] Additionally, some of the prisms will be provided with beam splitting or beam redirecting means at their hypotenuse surface. Such means may be arrays of mirrors of various forms, such as molded refractive or diffractive mirrors, or spherical or aspherical of-axis mirrors. Such minors can be used to couple light beams into or exit from channels.

[0019] Figure 3 shows in perspective view a pair of prisms of the kind shown in Figures 1 and 2, coupled together to form a light cube and Figure 4 is a cross section from a top view of such a light cube where, 12C is the hypotenuse surface where there typically will be provided beam redirecting or splitting localized surface regions as previously discussed.

[0020] In particular, two-dimensional arrays of microlenses with one optical beam per lenslet form a highly suitable optical relay for a lens waveguides. Since at all points along the beam paths, each beam is distinct and its position in the array remains constant along the lens waveguide. Optical routing can be readily performed by partial beam splitting mirrors at the rectangular hypotenuse surfaces when fan-in and fan-out of optical beams are desired and by patterned mirrors where routing is required.

[0021] This permits a wide variety of optical wiring patterns that can be configured in the hardware for various purposes. Moreover, the peripheral border portion of each square surface of a prism can be used to support the electrical circuitry of the associated individual microlaser transmitters or microdiode receivers, or other means used to fan signals into the waveguide or select receiver signals that are fanned out of the waveguide.

[0022] The fan-in of a beam into a path destined for travel to an assigned receiver can be controlled by excitation of an appropriate laser of the microlaser array aimed at a particular mirror in the array of mirrors at the beam combining surface.

[0023] The fan-out of a beam from its path along the waveguide to a selected receiver can be controlled by

appropriate locations of a beam redirecting mirror aimed at the appropriate microdiode of the microdiode array at the called station along the waveguide.

[0024] Figure 5 illustrates the use of a plurality of light cubes 21-25 coupled together to form an optical network. In particular, light cube 21 is provided at insets 21A and 21B with microlasers that are used to form light beams 26 that are redirected at its hypotenuse surface 21C for longitudinal travel through the network, for example to light cube 25 where the beams are redirected by its hypotenuse surface 25C into receivers at insets 25A and 25B. Similarly, light cubes 22 and 24 similarly can be used to transmit or to receive additional light beams from the network.

[0025] Figures 6 shows how various circuit components can be supported on a prism 40 of the kind described. In particular, an electrooptic package 42, for example a package including an array of microlasers useful as transmitters, is positioned on surface 40A at an inset (hidden) but similar to inset 41, on adjacent surface 40B, and other packages 44 including integrated circuit devices are positioned around package 42 on printed circuits 43. The integrated circuit devices provide the electronics needed to control the electrooptic devices. Alternatively, the electrooptic package could include an array of photodetectors for use as receivers.

[0026] Figure 7 shows in cross section a light cube 50 that is formed by combining a pair of prisms 51, 52 of slightly modified form. In this instance, each of the prisms also includes an insert 51A, 52A hollowed out of its hypotenuse surface where there may be supported additional control circuitry. Again typically an array of mirrors or microlens for control of the beam directions will be positioned intermediate between prisms 51, 52.

[0027] Figures 8, 9 and 10 illustrate a plug-in module 27 and a connector module 80 that can be used to connect an electrooptic device or an array of optical fibers to a light cube for coupling light beams either into or out of a lens waveguide of the kind shown in Figure 5. A rectangular plug-in module 27 is shown in Figure 8 and includes electrooptic package 54, integrated circuit device 56 and a lenslet array 55 which is preferably molded into the module 27. In Figure 5 the alignment of the central horizontal axis of the relay system is critical because of any misalignment will result in beam propagation errors. The plug-in module 27 may include active elements such as transmitters or receivers or optical fibers. The module is replaceable without modifying the basic network beam propagation path through light cubes 21-25. The alignment of module 27 is not as critical as the alignment of cubes 21 - 25. Male and female mating means 57, 58 cooperatively engage corresponding female and male mating means located on the surface of component 23. The mating of module 27 in the described manner allows light beams to enter or exit the network in Figure 5.

[0028] Figure 9 is a cross section view of the module 27 along section line A - A. Attached to the surface of

electrooptic package 54 is an array of receivers, e.g. photodiode, and/or transmitters, e.g. VCSEL, for receiving light beam 60 from and transmitting light beam 61 to lenslet array 55. The lenslet array focuses the light beams into or from the lens waveguide.

[0029] In order to provide accurate alignment of the array; a solder bump 62 is used to connect the electrooptic package 54 to the conductors 53 on the surface of the plug-in module 27 by flip-chip bonding.

[0030] In Figure 10, the connector 80 includes a plastic board that supports a row of optical fibers 81. The side walls of the inset in the light cube member is provided with a stack, for example, of V-shaped grooves 83 and the side edges of the plastic board are provided with similar matching grooves so that the plastic board can be slid into the inset to position the free ends of the optical fibers at the focal points of microlenses of a microlens array 82 in the light cube. A particular set of channels in the beam waveguide can be addressed by the choice of the height in the inset of the grooves into which the plastic board is inserted. Advantageously, the connector also includes a pair of spring clips 87 that can be fitted against shoulders provided for the purpose in the light cube.

[0031] Alternatively, by suitable modification, a vertical column of fibers could be connected to the light cube to couple to a vertical column of light beams in the beam waveguide. Moreover, a two-dimensional array of fibers could similarly be connected to the beam waveguide.

[0032] To improve the efficiency of the coupling between fibers, which are typically single mode fibers, and the microlenses as shown in Figure 11 it may be desirable to increase gradually the diameter of each fiber 81 as its free end is approached to increase the size of the light spot radiated at the free end of the fiber to relax the precision needed to align the fiber end with the focal point of the desired microlens in the array 82. The effect of tapering the fiber from a multimode core radius, of e.g., 50 microns, to a single mode core, e.g. 6 microns, allows for very efficient coupling from free space into a single mode fiber.

[0033] It can readily be appreciated that a complete beam waveguide network can be readily assembled with modules of the kind described. Alternatively, a group of such modules can be coupled together to form a limited portion of a much larger system only part of which is traversed over free space under control of a beam waveguide, as is known in the art.

[0034] It should also be appreciated that various other shapes can be combined to form light cubes. In particular, six pyramids each with a square base and four equilateral triangular surfaces can be combined to form a cube. Similarly a triangular cube of the kind shown in Figure 1 could be sliced in half, leaving the square surfaces intact and creating a new pair of hypotenuse surfaces where an inset may be provided for supporting additional optical elements.

[0035] Accordingly, it is to be appreciated that the spe-

cific embodiments depicted are merely illustrations of the general principles of the invention.

Claims

1. An optical component for use as a modular building block comprising:
 - a prism-shaped element of a material that is optically transparent and amenable to being shaped to a high degree of accuracy and including a pair of substantially similar input and output surfaces and a third surface, at least one of the input and output surfaces including a central inset opening; and
 - a combination of female and male mating means provided on one or more of such surfaces to permit the coupling together with a high degree of alignment of a plurality of such elements.
2. An optical component in accordance with Claim 1 in which at least one of the input and output surface includes in the inset an array of microlenses focused to the third surface.
3. An optical component in accordance with Claim 1 in which the third surface supports an array of beam directing means.
4. An optical component in accordance with Claim 1 in which at least one of the input and output surfaces includes in its inset an array of microlenses focused on the third surface and the third surface includes an array of beam directing means aligned with the array of microlenses.
5. An optical component in accordance with Claim 1 in which the prism is a rightangled triangular prism.
6. An optical component that includes a pair of prism shaped elements in accordance with Claim 5 in which respective hypotenuse surfaces of the two prisms are positioned opposite one another, the two prisms being coupled together by their female and male mating means.
7. An optical component in accordance with Claim 6 in which at least one of the input and output surfaces of one of the two prisms supports an array of transmitting or receiving means.
8. An optical component in accordance with Claim 6 in which an input surface of one of the prisms includes an array of transmitting means and an output surface of the other of the two prisms includes an array of receiving means.
9. An optical component in accordance with Claim 6 in which the beam directing means for redirecting incident light in a prescribed pattern.
10. An optical component in accordance with Claim 9 in which the central inset surface of each prism includes microlenses positioned to focus light from the transmitting means on the third surface and to focus light from the third surface on the receiving means.
11. An optical component in accordance with Claim 1 in which the prism is a pyramid with a square base such that six of such pyramids can be combined to form a light cube.
12. A plurality of optical components in accordance with Claim 1 coupled together in a modular assembly to form an optical network.
13. An optical component for modular assembly in an optical network in accordance with Claim 12 including means for supporting an array of optical fibers, said means being V-grooved in a manner to match V-grooves in the walls of the central inset opening in one of the surfaces of the prism.
14. An optical component in accordance with Claim 13 in which the means for supporting an array of optical fibers includes spring clip means for coupling to the prism.
15. An optical component in accordance with Claim 13 in which the optical fibers of the array have a free end of increasing diameter.
16. An optical component in accordance with Claim 15 in which the free ends of the fibers are positioned to couple radiatively with microlenses supported on the hypotenuse surface of a right angled triangular prism.
17. A plurality of optical components in accordance with Claim 1 coupled together in a modular assembly to form an information processing system.
18. A plurality of optical components in accordance with Claim 1 coupled together for forming a system for the routing of optical signals between transmitting and receiving means that are coupled to said plurality of components forming the system.
19. An optical network comprising:
 - a plurality of prism-shaped elements of a material that is optically transparent and amenable to being shaped to a high degree of accuracy and each element including a pair of substan-

tially similar input and output surfaces and a third surface, at least one of the input and output surfaces including a central inset opening; and

each element having a combination of female 5
and male mating means provided on one or more of such surfaces coupling together said plurality of elements with a high degree of alignment.

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20. An optical network as set forth in Claim 19, further comprising a plug-in module having female and male mating means provided on a surface-coupling said plug-in module to one of said elements.

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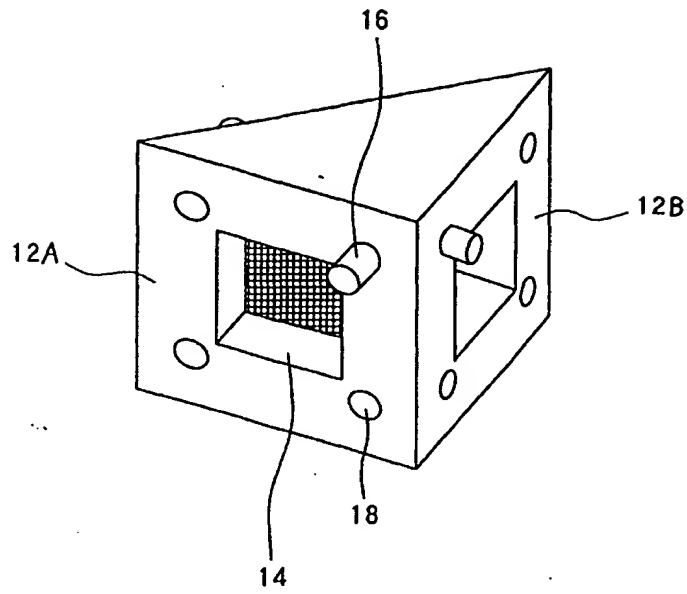


FIG. 1

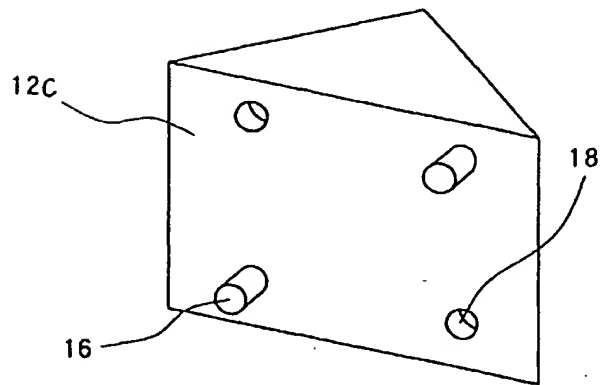


FIG. 2

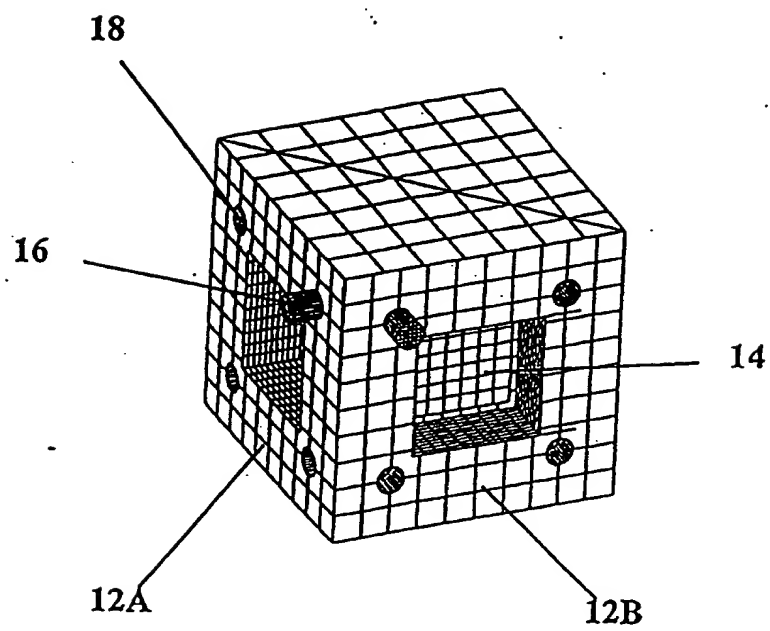


FIG. 3

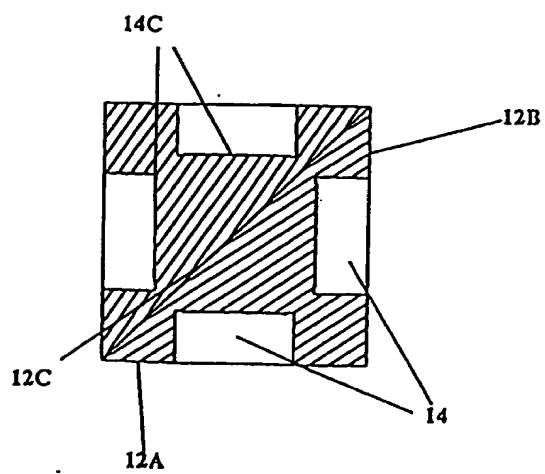


FIG. 4

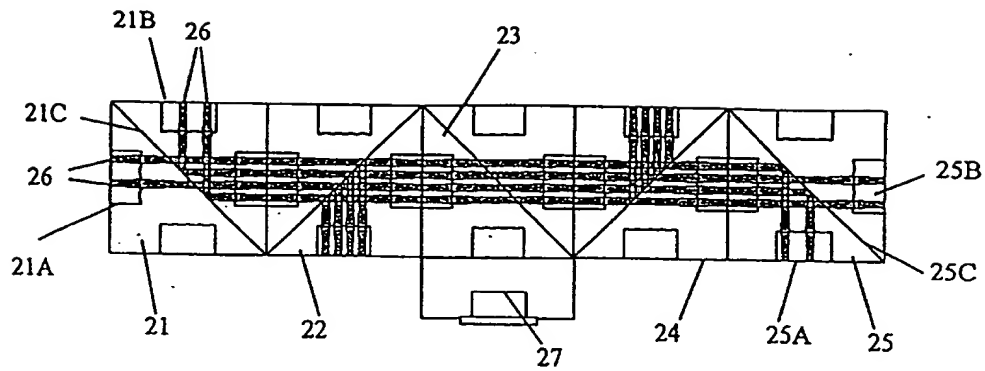


FIG. 5

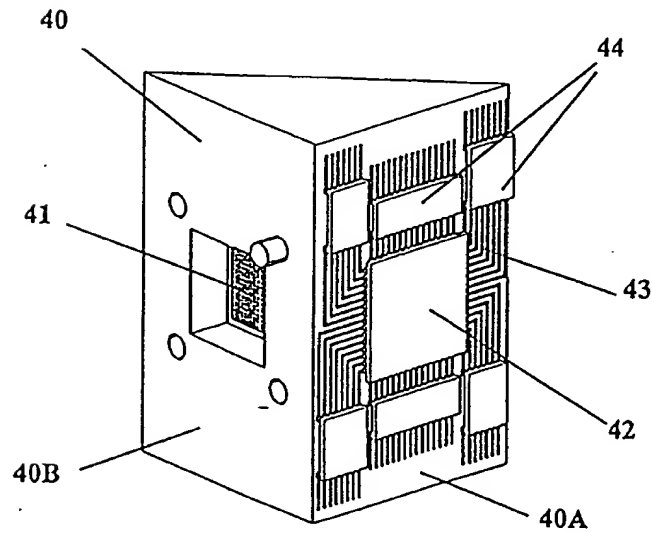


FIG. 6

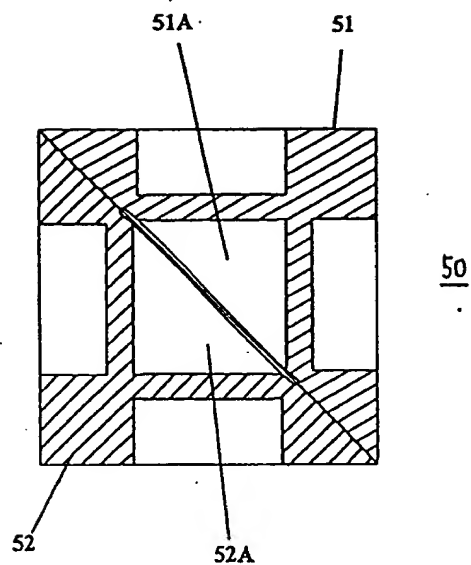


FIG. 7

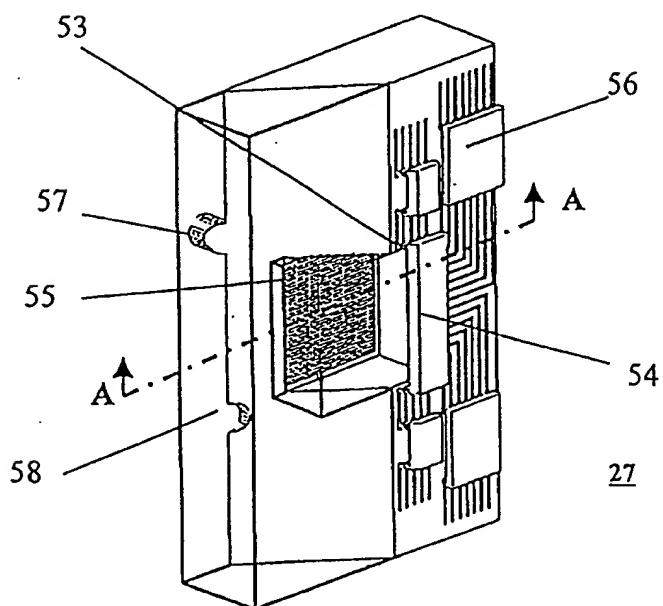


FIG. 8

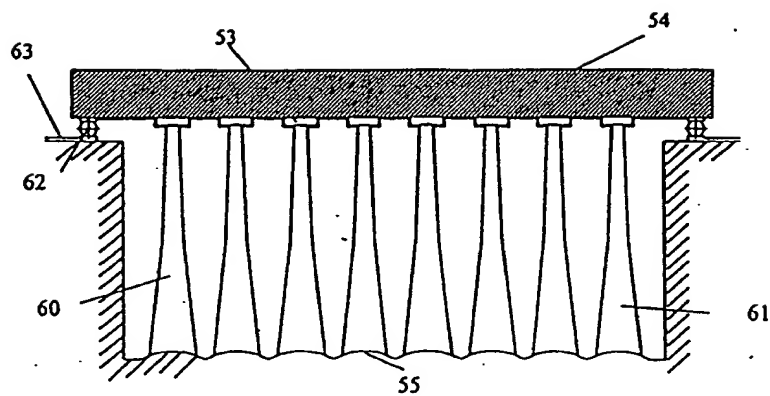


FIG. 9

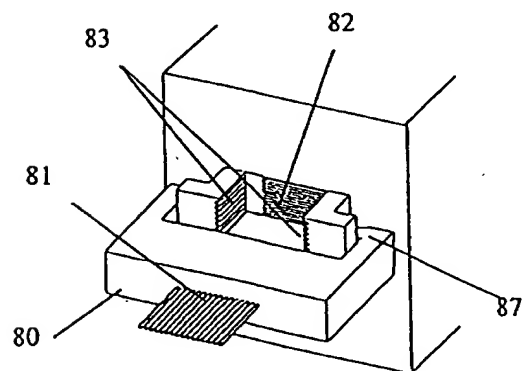


FIG. 10

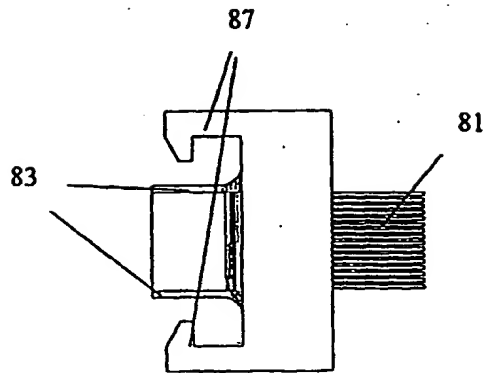


FIG. 11

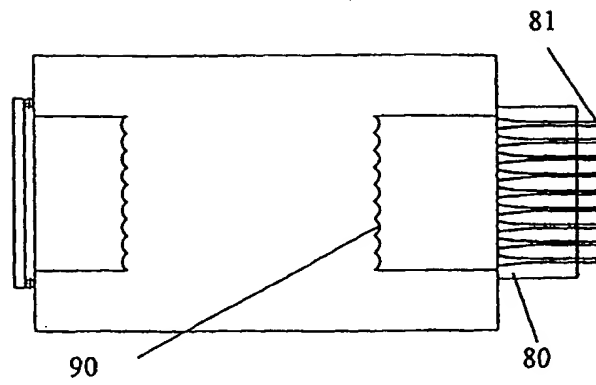


FIG. 12